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AUTHOR Virden, Tim
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ABSTRACT

A supportive peer group management program for behaviorally disordered students is described. Children learn to confront one another about problems in a helpful, structured way. A generic problem list based on actual classroom experiences is composed of such elements as aggravation, hurting, lying, and disrespect for self and others. Children are helped to associate problems with their own experiences and are encouraged to discuss their problems in the group meeting. Suggestions are offered for setting up the meeting, conducting the problem session, focusing the meeting, and providing followup activities. Documentation of progress is considered, as are ways of encouraging parent involvement. (CL)

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Supportive Peer Groups A Behavior Management Program for Children

by Tim Virden

Human society and biology are constructed so that cooperation is an absolute necessity for the survival of our species and of every individual. The ability to work with other people is the keystone to building and maintaining stable families, obtaining and keeping a job, being part of a neighborhood and community, establishing stable friendships and being a responsible citizen. Thus, one of the most important long-term goals of schools is to give students the skills and attitudes necessary to form and maintain stable, cooperative relationships with other people. Teaching needs to be aimed at promoting the competencies needed to work with others under the discipline imposed by a common task and purpose.

David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, Minnesota

TIM VIRDEN is a teacher of the behaviorally disordered in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

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Introduction

This chapter outlines a behavior management program based on groups. These groups draw their strength from children as helpers. The groups are for children and by children, with adult guidance. They are founded on the belief that children with problems know a great deal about their problems. If this knowledge can be organized and put to use helping one another, then change is inevitable. The power of peer support is immeasurable and the capacity for care is limitless.

Teachers of children with emotional and behavioral disabilities face enormous challenges. Understanding the vast range in disabilities, managing a classroom environment with the complexities offered by the integration of these disabilities, maintaining a healthy and productive relationship with parents and maintaining a consistent, objective and rational approach on a daily basis are but a few of these challenges.

Too often, teachers accept these challenges only to control behaviors and avoid conflict. Actual teaching (direct instruction) in behavior management with children is avoided. Token economies, point systems and other external management techniques are readily available and generally non-threatening to the teacher. They are easily managed and provide tangible reinforcement for the child. The behaviorist approach to classroom management also provides an easy and efficient means of data collection. However, the actual tools of self-management, behavioral analysis and communication are not developed. The child relates well to his or her checklist and reinforcement menu, but is unable to relate directly to his or her problems. The skills needed to analyze his or her behavior and express needs and feelings have not been taught.

As children grow, they are guided through important developmental stages. They are offered encouragement and a progression of new and more challenging tasks. If the child experiences difficulty in one or more areas, additional encouragement or instruction is provided. Children having problems with fine motor control or learning initial consonant sounds can receive remediation in a variety of ways. Reading laboratories, teacher associates, mother helpers and peer teachers are all used in schools to provide the necessary instruction to teach and reinforce these skills. The same remediation and reinforcement can be found in many areas of a child's lifetime instruction.

Behaviorally and emotionally disabled children need to learn new ways of behaving. They must receive direct instruction in self-management. They need to be provided with tools to analyze their behavior and the behavior of others. They must receive guidance throughout this process and be helped in refining their behavior as improvement develops.

The special education classroom provides an ideal environment for necessary skills to develop. Problems are easily identified, the student/teacher ratio is generally low, and a variety of social situations are available for trial of newly acquired skills. The environment offers safety and support during this difficult process and the "group" is present — all with problems, all in need of new skills to cope with these problems, and all with an unlimited capacity to care and help one another.

Behaviorally and emotionally disabled children need to learn new ways of behaving. They need to be provided with tools to analyze their behavior and the behavior of others.

The Peer Group

Developing a supportive peer group is not a new idea. Groups have existed from the beginning of time and their effect has been studied for about as long.

In the 1950's, a program of Guided Group Interaction (GGI) began at Highfields Residential Treatment Program in Hopewell, New Jersey. After completing work at Highfields, Harry Vorrath extended GGI to a program he called Positive Peer Culture (Garner 1980).

In *Positive Peer Culture* (1974), Vorrath and Brendtro outline a program designed for adolescents. The program uses the strength and support of the peer group to promote behavior change. The supportive peer group outlined here is based on this work, only modified to benefit young children.

Thirteen years of classroom teaching experience, graduate work under the direction of Dr. Howard Garner of Virginia Commonwealth University, and work at the Elk Hill Farm Residential Treatment Program provided the clinical base for the development of this program.

The belief that children know a great deal about themselves and their problems is the foundation for building the supportive peer group. This is not to say children don't have much to learn, but rather that what they know can be used and developed into a powerful tool for helping. With teacher guidance and peer support, even very young children with emotional and behavioral difficulties can become a closely knit group — caring and helping one another toward a more productive and happy school experience.

In their 1982 handbook, *Structuring Cooperative Learning Experiences in the Classroom*, David and Roger Johnson state:

Constructive peer relationships should be promoted in both family and school settings. Fostering such relationships may be the most important challenge facing parents, educators and other adults who wish to promote healthy development and effective socialization. The steps involved can be objectively identified. We can make a list of these steps and see if they are occurring through direct observation and sensitive questioning. If they are not occurring, we can identify appropriate measures to change the situation. The steps are:

1. Ensuring physical proximity between children and their peers.
2. Structuring cooperative interdependence: encouraging activities that stimulate peers to work or play together.
3. Emphasizing joint rather than individual products whenever feasible.
4. Directly teaching the interpersonal and small group skills needed to build and maintain collaborative relationships with peers; e.g., children can be helped to learn how to be effective leaders.
5. Giving children meaningful responsibility for the well-being and success of their peers.
6. Encouraging the feelings of support, acceptance, concern and commitment that are part of collaborative situations.
7. Holding children accountable for fulfilling their obligations and responsibilities to their collaborators and giving them mutual authority over each other.
8. Ensuring that children experience success in a cooperative group setting.
9. Promoting the appropriate exchange of personal information between children and their peers—neither joy nor sorrow should be experienced in solitude.
10. On occasion, structuring appropriate interpersonal and intergroup competition among peers.
11. Structuring appropriate individualistic activities on occasion.
12. Encouraging perspective-taking dialogues with diverse peers.
13. Modeling and providing opportunities for prosocial actions and activities.
14. Providing opportunities for children to participate in decision-making appropriate to their age.
15. Suppressing peer pressures for antisocial conduct.
16. Ensuring that, where possible, older children interact with and supervise younger ones, and that adults appropriately oversee (or monitor) such interactions.

The supportive peer group management program outlined in this chapter is based on children's ability to help and care for one another. It uses a gentle combination of "tough love" and "tender love." It provides a structured environment that allows flexibility in the classroom routine. It praises the children for showing their problems and rewards them for having the strength to change them.

The belief that children know a great deal about themselves and their problems is the foundation for building the supportive peer group. Even very young children can become a closely knit group, caring and helping one another toward a happy school experience.

Confrontation

The development of the peer group focuses on a "generic" problem list. Using this list and carefully guided confrontation techniques, the children help direct one another to more appropriate ways of working through their problems.

With confrontation used to point out these problems, it becomes important to teach the children how to confront one another in a "helpful" way. "Tender love" is a way of working through problems without closing down communication. It is carefully guided discussion that supports the child for having shown his or her problem. It is quiet, soft and direct, but tells it like it is. The child is told that classmates care about him or her and is encouraged to seek out their assistance. Tender love is touching, smiling, and plenty of eye contact. Above all, tender love is complete honesty and trust in the child's ability to make it.

"Tough love" confrontation is used less often and always under the careful watch of the teacher or group leader. Like tender love, tough love is honest, to the point, and requires eye contact. It isn't quiet and soft, however. Tough love demands that expectations be met. It says to the child: "You can do it, so why play games?" The highest expectations are maintained throughout the child's school experiences, for without the expectations there is no improvement.

Tough love can be physical, but not punitive. A child may need to be held, carried, or in some way restrained to avoid causing harm to him/herself or someone else. During this time, the child needs to be talked to in an effort to calm him or her down. The children can also participate in these more aggressive situations. They can easily offer their support and encouragement as the teacher restrains a child, or immediately afterward. Very young children should be discouraged from helping the teacher restrain another child, while older children may become vital in controlling the outrageous behaviors of their peers. This is always a helping time for everyone.

Structure

Teachers of children with emotional and behavioral disabilities are well aware of the need for structure. Structure provides the children with the security of routine. These expectations are clearly defined and the children work well within them. Too often, the need for structure is misunderstood by teachers. Providing children with ample seatwork, not allowing them to leave their seats, placing their desks along the outside walls of the classroom, demanding silence, and making the children raise their hands for all communication with the teacher are not necessarily examples of structure.

Structure is a pattern of relationships. For classroom purposes, this includes: child to child, child to teacher, child to environment, or teacher to environment. Without the benefit of these components, a full and well-rounded "structure" cannot exist. By restricting children in their ability to communicate with one another and interact with their environment, classroom teachers deny them a powerful opportunity to learn. By providing the children with a framework for self-control, the teacher can allow more classroom freedom and offer the children this opportunity to learn. A peer group management system offers full participation by the children and a more informal classroom atmosphere. The components of a good classroom structure are present and behavior management is placed in the children's hands.

The following material focuses on the actual development of the supportive peer group. It outlines a procedure used to develop this group and suggests possible alternatives to these procedures. Groups generally develop unique styles and operational characteristics, so the precise "plan" must be unique as well. The following procedures can serve as a guide. Any alterations will depend on the nature of the specific classroom group.

Developing the Group

The Problem List

Developing the ability to share ideas and feelings in an easily understood way is often difficult. Preparing ideas takes time and presenting them demands the use of communication skills that many people lack. Children with emotional and behavioral disabilities are no exception and often have a pronounced inability to communicate with their peers.

The formation of a generic "problem list" facilitates communication and provides a vehicle for organizing and presenting ideas. By sharing common labels of problems, each group member becomes part of the discussion. Each child can identify the problem, associate it to similar problems of his or her own, and provide suggestions and support relative to his or her own needs and experiences.

The length of a classroom problem list is not important, but the child's ability to associate his or her behaviors to this list is. The items on the classroom list should be very general, and carefully selected to service specific classroom needs. If stealing is an issue, then it should be included on the problem list; if not,

then it might better be dealt with under an equally appropriate category—showing disrespect to others.

The problem list can be written before the students arrive in school, but it is better to draw on actual classroom experiences. As the list develops, many of the common problems may fall under any of several headings. It doesn't matter what name the problem is given, as long as the student recognizes it. Taking someone's crayons may be seen as stealing, lying or disrespect. The difference is often a result of when the child recognizes the problem—before or after someone's feelings were hurt, before or after he got caught, if the crayons were actually stolen or just "borrowed" without permission. Recognition of a problem is far more important than the name given to the problem.

Vorrath and Brendtro's book provides an extensive problem list used with an adolescent population. While its length and scope are appropriate for adolescents, it would be difficult for a young child to deal with such an extensive list of definitions (Figure 1). Naming problems would become burdensome.

Figure 1

Problem Peer Culture Problem Solving List

1. **Self-Concept Problem:** Has a low opinion of self, feels inferior. When solved: Is self-confident and cannot easily be made to feel small or put down. Is able to solve his problems and make positive contributions to others. Doesn't feel sorry for self even though he may have shortcomings. Believes he is good enough to be accepted by anybody.
2. **Inconsiderate of Others:** Does things which are damaging to others. When solved: Shows concern for others even if he does not like them or know them well. Tries to help people with problems rather than hurt them or put them down.
3. **Inconsiderate of Self:** Does things which are damaging to self. When solved: Shows concern for self, tries to correct mistakes and improve self. Understands his limitations and is willing to discuss problems. Doesn't hurt self or put self down.
4. **Authority Problem:** Does not want to be managed by anybody. When solved: Shows ability to get along with those in authority. Is able to accept advice and direction from others. Does not try to take advantage of authority figures even if they can be manipulated.
5. **Misleads Others:** Draws others into negative behavior. When solved: Shows responsibility for the effect of his behavior on others who follow him. Does not lead others into negative behavior. Shows concerns and helps rather than taking advantage of them.
6. **Easily Misled:** Is drawn into negative behavior by others. When solved: Seeks out friends who care enough about him not to hurt him. Doesn't blindly follow others to buy friendship. Is strong enough to stand up for himself and makes his own decisions. Doesn't let anyone misuse him.
7. **Aggravates Others:** Treats people in negative, hostile ways. When solved: Gets along well with others. Does not need to get attention by irritating or annoying others. Gets no enjoyment from hurting or harrasing people. Respects others enough not to embarrass, provoke or bully them.
8. **Easily Angered:** Often is irritated, provoked, or has tantrums. When solved: Is not easily frustrated. Knows how to control and channel anger, not letting it control him. Understands the put-down process and has no need to respond to challenges. Can tolerate criticism or even negative behavior from others.
9. **Stealing:** Takes things that belong to others. When solved: Sees stealing as hurting another person. Has no need to be sneaky or to prove himself by stealing. Knows appropriate ways of getting the things he wants. Would not stoop to stealing even if he could get away with it.
10. **Alcohol or Drug Problem:** Misuses substances that could hurt self. When solved: Feels good about self and wouldn't hurt self. Does not need to be high to have friends or enjoy life. Can face his problems without a crutch. Shows concern for others who are hurting themselves by abusing alcohol or drugs.
11. **Lying:** Cannot be trusted to tell the truth. When solved: Is concerned that others trust him. Has strength to face mistakes and failures without trying to cover up. Does not need to lie or twist the truth to impress others. Tells it like it is.
12. **Fronting:** Puts on an act rather than being real. When solved: Is comfortable with people and does not have to keep trying to prove himself. Has no need to act superior, con people, or play the show-off role. Is not afraid of showing his true feelings to others.

The supportive peer group praises children for showing their problems and rewards them for having the strength to change them.

The following problem list was used with youngsters in the third, fourth and fifth grades. It provides alternatives in naming problems, but is short enough not to confuse them. Almost anything happening during a school day that would cause a problem in the normal operation of that day could be identified on this list.

Problem List

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| 1. Hurting problem | 5. Small feelings |
| 2. Lying problem | 6. Aggravation |
| 3. Misleading others | 7. Showing disrespect to self and others |
| 4. Being easily misled | |

It is important for children to *feel* the significance of this problem list. It is best built as these problems occur. The definitions then become a product of the group, and everyone feels some responsibility for their development.

Hurting Problem

If the supportive peer group is to be the primary behavior management program, then it is necessary to begin as soon as possible in the school year. Generally, one of the first things a teacher does when school begins in the fall is to go over the list of classroom rules. Using the peer group as the management tool, it is not necessary to develop this rule list.

It works well in the beginning stages of group development to have only one rule. That rule is "no hurting." This also provides an opportunity to introduce the first problem on the problem list and work together with the children to establish a common definition of hurting. When the opportunity arises, the teacher can point out situations that lead to possible hurting problems and provide suggestions for alternative behavior. When hurting does occur, the teacher can exploit these times and work the children into a "helping" role. It may be necessary for the teacher to tell the other children what to say or "put words into their mouths," but eventually, the child will pick up on this and be on their way to becoming good, independent, insightful helpers.

While hurting can be seen in a variety of ways, it is necessary to help the children focus their definition on several specific issues. A good definition of hurting singles out three key issues: property, body and feelings. Hurting can then be defined as any activity that does harm to someone's body, property or feelings. This also includes hurting one's own body, property or feelings.

It is often difficult for the children to understand how they can hurt themselves and have this be a problem. The idea of "self respect" is paramount in feeling good about oneself, and this is an excellent first-day discussion starter. It will provide the children with an opportunity to listen to one another, and try to communicate their ideas to the group. This also provides the teacher with the opportunity to assess the communication skills of individuals, pinpoint any significant problem areas that prohibit the group from working well together, and note specific strengths within the group.

With "no hurting" established as the only classroom rule, the teacher can then begin the problem list. This can be a large poster on the wall with its first item being **HURTING PROBLEM**. It can be explained to the children that additional items will be added to the list as it becomes necessary, and they should focus their attention on monitoring their hurting problems and helping others when a hurting problem occurs.

Lying Problem

Lying problems are a common occurrence. Often times one lie is accompanied by several other lies, and soon trust within the group is eroded. These are difficult times in a group. It is hard to determine when someone isn't telling the truth, and if the lie is not caught, then it becomes easier to lie again. Lying problems breed other problems. Once this trust level breaks down it takes double the energy and time to rebuild.

Small feelings make a child stand out, and he becomes an easy target for classmates' ridicule.

It is possible to be misled without anyone doing the misleading. If another class is working on an activity in the school media center, and a child becomes distracted, leaves his or her assignment, and joins the activity of the other class, then he or she has become misled. This was *his* or *her* problem alone as the other class was doing what they were supposed to be doing. There was no deliberate attempt to mislead.

Small Feelings

Small feelings are easily recognizable and occur frequently in the school day. Small feelings are any feelings or activities that make a person look foolish. This includes such things as pouting, whimpering, whining, feeling sorry for oneself, being crabby, saying nasty words, calling people names, etc. Small feelings, while not generally outrageous or explosive, tend to interfere with the normal operation of the school day. Relationships among the children are strained, school work is incomplete or poorly done, and there is an air of tension in the classroom.

It is important to remind the children that their job in school is to complete their work, develop meaningful relationships with other children, and "get their lives together" enough to return to a regular class. Small feelings are one of the greatest inhibitors when a child is working to regain an acceptable position in the mainstream of the regular school program. These feelings make the child stand out, and the child becomes an easy target for classmates' ridicule.

It is important to help the children understand the distinction between small feelings that interfere with school progress and building relationships with other children, and those feelings that are genuine expressions of emotion. The loss of a pet, saying goodbye to a good friend or classmate, and the divorce of one's parents are examples of emotional situations where crying or feeling sad would be appropriate for almost anyone. However, crying because it is time to check out library books, or spending the day moping because the lunch menu says macaroni and cheese instead of hot dogs, would not be appropriate for even the youngest school-aged child.

Aggravation

An aggravation problem is a small feeling that gets out of hand. It is when the crying becomes sobbing, the naughty words become screaming profanity, or the name calling becomes physical abuse. If the situation requires physical intervention on the part of the teacher or other classmates, the problem would be considered aggravation.

Aggravation is probably the easiest problem to recognize. It is an outrageous behavior that would be recognized by even the untrained observer. For some children, just pointing out the problem is enough to help them pull themselves together. For others, the intervention must be more dramatic. Physically holding the child, instructing the child to sit in a quiet place in the classroom for a period of time, removing the child from the classroom, placing the child into "time out," and even sending the child home are all possible consequences for aggravation problems. Care must be taken in deciding the best method of intervention so as not to remove responsibility for the problem from the child. Regardless of how outrageous the behavior is, the child is responsible for that behavior and must be helped to face the problem as soon after it occurs as possible.

"Time out" rooms or boxes are common in many classrooms and schools for emotionally or behaviorally disabled children. These must be used only as a last resort. If the child becomes so out of hand that the teacher or other class members cannot maintain control, then the time out room may be a necessary step. However, it is important to exhaust all other possibilities before using time out. This can become a convenient escape for the child who does not wish to deal with his or her outrageous behaviors. A chair outside the classroom door or a quiet place in the room can be used just as effectively as a time out room, but the child must be weaned from this support quickly. Dealing with problems and developing successful alternatives to outrageous behaviors cannot be done if the child seeks the shelter of the time out room as an answer to his or her problems.

Lying problems occur when someone does not tell the truth. This can be a false statement or not telling the entire truth. One is no worse than the other. They are simply lying problems that need to be worked on.

The most common lying problem is denying ownership of a problem. Denials are the tools of the child who is not ready to deal with his or her problem. It is an easy way to avoid confrontation about an emotionally intense issue. It takes the heat off the sore spot and onto something the child is more equipped to handle. The teacher must be careful to point out denials and explain how they can be used to change the focus of the discussion. The group will readily accept the challenge of ending denials and will press on to the important issues. It is interesting to note that once children learn that having problems and admitting to them doesn't hurt, their denials will decrease rapidly.

Misleading Others

There should always be a clear distinction made between helping and hurting. If someone is not receiving help from other classmates during a problem, then those who do not help are hurting. It should be stressed that the reason they are working on their problems is so they can participate in other important school activities and become more involved with friends outside their immediate classroom. They must help one another and give their support during difficult times. They must become the kind of person that others can trust. The atmosphere of trust is essential in establishing the community necessary to promote positive problem solving.

Vorrath and Brendtro define *misleading others* as drawing others into a negative behavior. It is not only a problem when the child gets him/herself into trouble, but is as much a problem when the child draws others into a problem. The child doing the misleading doesn't necessarily have to participate in the negative behavior. He or she can "set up" another student and then abandon him or her to accept the blame. The set up is often very subtle and can go unnoticed. The abandoned child is defenseless in such situations, as explaining what happened usually sounds like a denial and places blame for a problem on someone else.

When confronting someone about a problem, care must be taken at all times. It is at these times that "tender love" becomes the best approach. It allows the child to talk openly without feeling intimidated. It puts a "soft" seriousness into the discussion without taking out the importance of honesty.

Being Easily Misled

In every group, there is the potential for leadership. This leadership can demonstrate itself in both positive and negative ways. Positive leadership can offer growth and support to the other group members. This cannot happen unless the group is willing to be led. In her book, *Groups in Schools*, Dr. Ruth Newman addresses the issue of leadership. In the chapter on group life, she says:

A leader, no matter how sure he is that he wants to teach or lead a group in certain ways, will not be able to do so if the group will not let him. "Yes, sure we want to learn," they say—but not this, not that, not if you speak like that, have white skin, have black skin, use that material," etc. If the group, whether for constructive or destructive reasons, doesn't want the leader to "do his thing," it can block or immobilize him.

Leadership, being the critical issue that it is, demands a great deal of time. The teacher must offer the guidance necessary to encourage this leadership. The teacher must also work with the group, developing its ability to accept leadership and follow those that offer constructive leadership.

Being easily misled is a problem demonstrated by a child, or group of children, choosing to follow negative leadership. Being drawn into a fight, joining the class in a work boycott, or participating in a cafeteria food fight are easily recognizable examples of being misled.

Often times when someone is easily misled there is someone deliberately misleading him or her. The set up is a very deliberate attempt at misleading someone. Some members of the class may be susceptible to being misled in this fashion and must be taught to recognize when this is happening to them.

It may be necessary for the teacher to tell children what to say, but eventually children will pick up on this on their way to becoming good, independent, insightful helpers.

Showing Disrespect to Self and Others

This seventh problem on the list could easily be divided into two separate problems if the class situation demands. Disrespect problems tend to be a "catch-all" for general classroom behaviors that annoy teachers and students. Whispering and talking during daily work time, wasting classroom materials, drumming pencils, humming and vocalizing with the intent to deliberately make someone mad, talking back to the teacher, answering one another in a rude way, and refusing to listen when other classmates are offering their help and suggestions are but a few of the many ways of showing disrespect. Belching, passing gas, body odor, not brushing one's teeth, losing daily papers, bad table manners and refusing to eat also fall into this area.

As the children are labeling their problems, it is easy to call everything disrespect. In one sense, much of the inappropriate behavior is disrespectful to themselves or someone else, but often this is just an easy way of not having to give the problem much thought. The children should be encouraged to seek another name for their problem unless it is clearly an issue of disrespect. This problem area could be eliminated or changed if necessary. Vorrath and Brendtro's problem list uses "authority" and "inconsiderate" as alternatives to the word "disrespect."

With the problem list completed and channels of communication beginning to develop, it is important for the teacher to guide the children through their discussion of problems. This is done during a daily group meeting.

The Group Meeting

The group meeting is a time that belongs to the children. Throughout the day as problems have occurred, the children should be reminded that in addition to the immediate discussion, they will have the opportunity to discuss their problems during the group meeting. If the problem is not a serious one, any discussion can be delayed until the group meeting. This is the children's time to work things out under the direct supervision and guidance of the teacher. The group meeting must become the most important part of the school day.

In the group meeting, the children will demonstrate an understanding of their problems. The children receive help from peers, and offer their help and suggestions in return. Participation in activities outside the special class depends on the child's active participation in the group meeting. Group members are responsible for deciding who is ready to participate in gym class or art class with a regular classroom. A positive attitude about the group meeting, a willingness to discuss one's problems, an open mind in accepting the help and suggestions of the other group members, a willingness to offer help and suggestions to other group members, and improvement in general classroom behaviors are all signs of a positive group member who is ready to participate in an activity outside the special class.

A regularly scheduled meeting is a must. For younger children, two short meetings may be necessary. The meeting is best when held toward the end of the school day. Discussion can be focused on the present day, and carrying problems over from one day to the next can be avoided. Care should be taken never to skip a group meeting. It is the most important part of the school day. If a field trip is scheduled, then the meeting should be held during a quiet time immediately after the trip or, if need be, at some time during the trip. If the school day is shortened for parent conferences or holidays, then the meeting should be held before the children go home. Skipping a group meeting gives the impression that the children can do without it. Only as a child prepares to move on to a less restrictive classroom and is being weaned from dependence on the group should a group meeting ever be missed. Even then, some contact with the group is still necessary.

Setting Up the Meeting

Setting up the group meeting is a very simple procedure, and is usually done by one of the children. Chairs are arranged in a circle so that the children sit very close to one another. It is important that the participants pay close attention during the meeting, so the circle must be "tight." The teacher or group leader also sits in the circle, as does any other regular classroom supervisor (student teacher, associate,

**Care and help are two key elements in a successful group meeting.
Trust cannot be built in an atmosphere of suspicion.**

Problems shared in the group are not public announcements. They are private and meant to be shared with other group members.

regular volunteer, etc.). Class visitors are not invited to sit in the group, but may sit just outside the group and listen. The group is very much a "community" and must be kept that way. The specialness of the meeting must be encouraged, and the omission of outsiders reinforces the importance of the meeting.

During the meeting, the teacher provides guidance and organization. The meeting must be kept moving, and it is up to the teacher to see that things don't bog down. In an effort to distinguish the roles of the children and the teacher, the teacher may wish to sit behind a student's desk. The meeting is to be seen as the students' meeting, and the desk may help make the distinction between the participants and the group leader (teacher).

The group meeting should take place in the same part of the classroom each day. As the group develops, the children will begin looking forward to the meeting, and they're good about cleaning up their activity to prepare for the meeting. The meeting location should be away from distraction and provide a sense of security for the children. Problems shared in the group are not public announcements. They are private and meant to be shared with other group members.

Thinking Through the Day

When the children are seated, the group meeting begins. No one is to leave until the meeting is completed. The age and maturity of the children will influence how they think through their day. It is usually necessary to have them close their eyes as the group leader talks them through the day. They are asked to think carefully about each segment of the school day and try to recall any special problems they may have had and name them using the "problems list." This usually takes only a few minutes and, after a time, the children will naturally sit down and do this by themselves.

Problem Session

The problem session is the part of the group meeting when the children tell other group members about any problems they have had during the day. The group leader should establish a routine for the problem session. Beginning with a child sitting to either side of the leader and moving around the group is a very simple procedure.

The child must be able to tell the group the name of each problem and explain what happened. The child should also be able to tell the other group members any alternatives to the problem behavior. It is important when telling a problem that no one else's name is mentioned unless the child is telling of someone he or she misled. If someone else is involved in the problem, that person will have a turn later in the meeting.

The children must learn that *why* is not as important as *what*. If John hit Thomas because Thomas called him a name, the issue for John is hitting (hurting or aggravation). The issue for Thomas is name calling. John and Thomas can work on building their relationship later in the meeting. Blaming others for one's problems is called "shifting the weight," and will be discussed later.

It is often necessary to limit the number of problems that any one student can talk about during a group meeting. For some children with many problems, it can become an endless list. In such a case, the problems that were most significant to the child should be mentioned. Limiting the number of problems to three for each session is a good practice.

Care and help are two key elements in a successful group meeting. Talking about problems must become a helpful process, not a tattle-tale session. The children come together to share their strengths and weaknesses and draw support from their friends. Trust cannot be built in an atmosphere of suspicion.

When a child is unable to identify any problems during the problem session, the other group members may help. If this happens, the group leader may wish to stop having the children remind one another of problems or limit the number of times each child can help. The group leader must help the children focus on the problem, not the number of problems.

For some children, talking with the group will be very difficult. If a child is unable to talk about his or her problems during the formative stages of the group meetings, the teacher needs to offer encouragement and possibly name the problems for the child. If this persists, the child should be asked to sit outside the group

and participate only by listening. What to do with children that are asked to leave the group meeting will also be discussed later.

The problem session is a very good time to stress the importance of good listening skills. The children should pay close attention to each other. The ability to give genuine help and support can only come through careful listening. It is a very interesting activity to video-tape a group meeting and have the children tally the number of times they were not paying close attention. They will be very surprised at themselves and amazed when identifying their specific characteristics (twisting hair, swinging feet, wringing hands, turning face away from the speaker, etc.). Repeating this activity every so often enables both the teacher and the students to note improvements and focus on behaviors that still need improvement.

Focusing the Meeting

Discussion will develop as the children share their problems with the group. When the problem session is over, the leader or the group decides if there is a problem mentioned that needs special attention. The group will then focus the discussion on the individual having the problem. This is the time for a serious look at the events that surrounded the problem.

The group members usually carry this part of the meeting. They offer suggestions to the individual that had the problem. The discussion is guided by the group leader, but must be regulated by the group. Free exchange of ideas is important. Too much control will interfere with the generation of ideas and inhibit participation and communication.

The focus of the meeting can be a very intense experience. Tempers may flare, tears may fall, or the child may choose not to say anything. Regardless of how mad the other group members may become during this time, the group leader must keep things pulled together and moving in a supportive direction. This is a helping time for the children, and the teacher must help them discover how they can be tender but firm. The expectations they set for one another will yield far greater results than any the teacher might get.

Tears are not necessarily a sign of weakness or small feelings. During this part of the group meeting the tears may be those of relief, sorrow or shame. The children must be supported when they begin to see how they have hurt themselves or other members of the class. Their tears must be accepted as an indication of genuine feelings of care.

There will be times when it is not necessary to focus the meeting. This is a good time to talk about general classroom concerns: lunchroom behavior, care of classroom games, new building procedures, field trip expectations, etc.

Follow-up Activities

After the meeting has been focused and the issues resolved, it is helpful to have the children participate in a brief follow-up activity before leaving the group meeting. These activities need not be time consuming or complicated, but should serve to pull things together for the group and finish the meeting on a positive note. Having the children tell the most important thing that happened to them during the day, telling one good thing about someone else in the group, sharing something they are proud of, or simply expressing their feelings about the meeting are all good ways to end a group meeting.

The group leader may wish to do a short socio-gram with the group. Having the children indicate who is the best helper, who they would like to sit by, who they would elect the class president, etc., tells the teacher a lot about leadership in the group.

Simple checklists, fill-in-the-blank surveys and other effective measurement instruments provide the children with variety and give the teacher valuable information about the children and the group.

If the group meeting is short, the teacher may wish to have a more lengthy activity. Guidance filmstrips or movies are good discussion starters. This is also a good time to talk about personal hygiene and good grooming. The group leader may wish to keep a checklist involving such things as brushing teeth, combing hair, taking a bath, etc. These can then be discussed during the group meeting the following day. Children that have poor health habits are showing disrespect to themselves and the people around them. For children, looking good is an important part of feeling good.

Free exchange of ideas is important. Too much control will interfere with the generation of ideas and inhibit communication.

These children, like all children, share a need to learn. Their play is their work, and they build bridges to more sophisticated learning.

Being Removed from the Group Meeting

The group meeting must remain the most important part of the children's day. They must show respect throughout the meeting. They must listen carefully, offer suggestions to the other children, and be truthful and fair when presenting their problems. If this does not happen, the child who has shown disrespect to the group must be asked to leave the group meeting and sit in a chair just outside the circle. This can be done by the group leader or the children in the group.

While sitting outside the group, the child must not participate in the group discussion. He or she should sit quietly and listen. The children should be instructed to ignore any foolish behavior as the group continues. When the group meeting is over, the children may wish to confront this individual about his or her behavior.

The child who has been asked to leave the group meeting can only return to the group when all of the other group members agree. The child must consult with them individually to talk about getting back into the meeting and be able to present reasons for return. If any member disagrees, the individual must remain outside the group.

The group leader must be aware of the group members' reasons for refusing to allow the child back into the group meeting. If the leader feels it is necessary, he or she can overrule the decision of the group. It is important to explain why the group's decision has been reversed.

As the group develops, it becomes increasingly important for the children to participate in the meetings. They develop feelings of responsibility to themselves and the other members. They feel badly about being asked to leave and are usually reinstated within a day or two. Seeing other group members progress and move into special activities in the regular school program is a powerful motivation to return to the group and begin working on problems.

Keeping a Journal

Keeping a journal with the children is a good way for them to record their daily activities. In this journal, they should write about important things that happened during their day, including any problems they had. In this way they can go back through their journal and review a personal account of their day, week or month. It is their record of any recurring problems or special events.

Provide time for the children to write in their journals immediately after group meeting, while everything is fresh in their minds. They can also include any suggestions from the group they felt were important or useful (See Figure 2). It is also interesting to have the children draw a picture to accompany the journal entry.

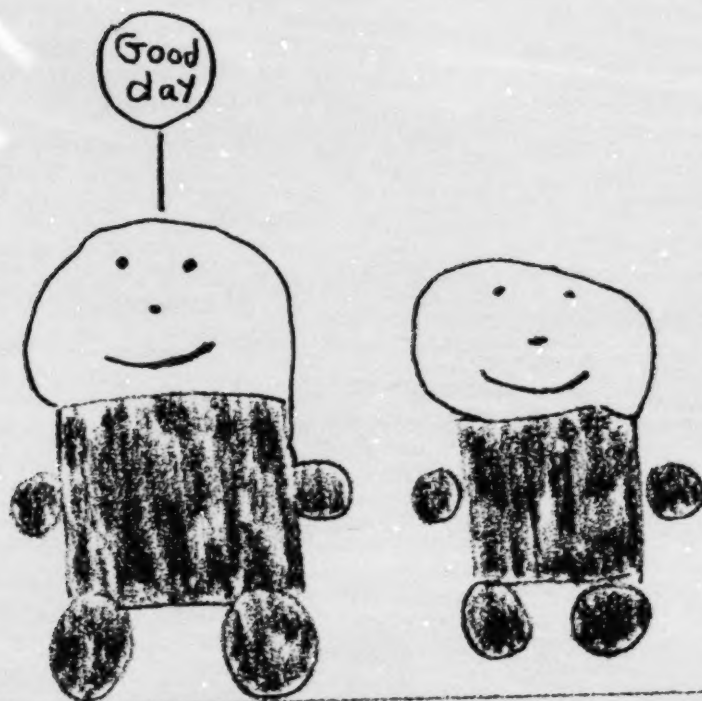
Record Keeping

Documentation of behavior change is always a necessary part of the special child's evaluation program. While behavior change is often visible, it is necessary to illustrate this change. The documentation facilitates communication between the teacher, parent and child. With successful integration as the goal, documentation is necessary to show the child is readying for this experience.

The documentation program must be manageable and produce the necessary information. It must help the teacher in pinpointing specific problems and in showing improvement in these behaviors. This may be done through informal surveys and questionnaires or by teacher observation and data keeping. Many excellent behavior rating scales (Sodac, 1979) and attitude surveys are also available. Any of the following will serve the classroom teacher well:

1. Devereux Elementary School Behavior Rating Scale
2. Preschool and Primary Nowicki-Strickland Internal-External Control Scale
3. Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale
4. Burke's Behavior Rating Scale

Figure 2
Journal Entry



April 21, 1980
I had a good day. I
didn't have no problems.
I did good at music
and math. I'm gona
eat lunch with Mr
Percharbrider's class
tomorrow. I'm gona
ignor people when they
call me names. I'm very
nerves about tomorrow.

Children in special classes usually arrive with an ample cumulative folder. Report cards, psychological reports, anecdotal records, and similar materials can provide an extensive list of interesting behaviors and problems. Parents can also provide input on specific school or home related problems.

Figure 3 shows a sample list drawn from cumulative records. This is a good list to use when gathering data during the first weeks of school. By using a new sheet daily and simply making a check each time the behavior is identified, a pattern will develop showing which behaviors are most pronounced. These results can be shared during the group meeting, calling the group's attention to each student's specific problems.

Figure 3
Problem Behavior List

- Noncompliance
- Peer conflict
- Adult conflict
- Appears restless
- Distracted easily
- Tunes into distant noise
- Fascination with orange (repeated interest)
- Fascination with spinning objects
- Talk of game shows
- Incomplete assignment
- Upset during activity change
- Loose associations in speech
- Perseverates on bizzare subject matter

Figure 4 shows a more refined list. This list contains the most significant items from the previous list. Also included on this list are "helping others" and "positive group member." In the initial stages of group development, it is important to focus the children's attention on helping one another. Recording the frequency of "helping" reinforces its importance and aids in focusing group leadership. Being a "positive group member" is each student's goal, and all "positive" behaviors should be recognized daily.

Figure 5 is an example of the list used after the group meetings have matured and the problem list has been established. It is simply a problem list for each child in the group. As the problem sessions develop, a record is kept of the weekly problems of each child. This list can be shared daily before the group meeting begins, or can be reviewed each Friday. Patterns develop quickly, and the group soon becomes aware of each child's specific problem areas.

The children can be encouraged to keep behavior checklists at home. Hanging a list on the refrigerator encourages family participation in the discussion of the child's problems. Keeping a list by the child's bed encourages the child to review each day before falling asleep.

Group Restrictions

Creating a supportive, peer-oriented environment can eliminate many routine discipline problems. With the children monitoring themselves and one another, the teacher can direct attention to the academic needs of the children. However, there are no guarantees that problems will not arise.

When daily "problems" fail to decrease (Figure 5), a student is placed on group restriction. Restriction is used only when problem behaviors persist. It should not become a matter of routine. Repeated use of restriction will diminish its significance. The group is responsible for deciding if a student is placed on restriction and for any changes in the classroom arrangement.

A study carrel is substituted for the student's desk, and he or she is moved a short distance away from the group. The child is required to stay in his or her seat at all times. If Janet leaves the room for lunch, to go to the bathroom, or to check out books from the school library, she must have another group member holding her hand at all times. Field trips, swimming lessons, and leaving the building at the end of the school day are no exception. If the student "needs" to have others regulate his or her behavior, then passing from the locker room to the swimming pool is just as important as going to the lunchroom. The responsibility of caring for this student can be shared by all group members. The ability to avoid being misled is an important prerequisite.

Figure 4

Behavior Checklist II

Tommy

Wasting Time							
"Attitudes" about work							
Following negatively							
Helping others							
Positive group member							

Figure 5

Behavior Checklist III

Tommy

Hurting							
Lying							
Misleading others							
Being easily misled							
Small feelings							
Aggravation							
Showing disrespect							

If a disruptive child on group restriction presents a problem for the group member who must look after him or her, the child can be placed under the supervision of two group members. The study carrel is moved to another part of the classroom, and he or she cannot leave the classroom without two group members, one holding each hand.

In addition to classroom restrictions (both for one and two group member supervision), the student is restricted at recess. He or she must play in a specific area outlined by the teacher. Others may join the child there, but he or she cannot leave the area. Further restriction requires teacher supervision and a home visit, if necessary.

When the group decides a child is ready to come off the restrictive status, he or she returns to original status in the group. It is not necessary to work back into the group by passing through less restrictive situations.

Rearranging the seating for the restricted child is the group's responsibility. Hand shakes and pats on the back are in order for the child who has worked hard and is ready to return to regular group member status. The student placed in group restriction must still participate in group meetings unless he or she has also been asked to leave the meetings.

The Games Children Play

As the group process develops, so will the "games" played by the children. The teacher and the group members must become aware of these games as they interfere with the progress of the group.

The "but game" is a recurring theme in all of our lives. "Yes, I did that, but. . . .!" Teachers have heard this one a million times. The children use it as an excuse for their problems, but have difficulty finding anyone who will buy it. When talking about problems, the children must remember to speak only of their participation in the problem. Excuses are not acceptable answers when a problem has been identified. If there has been a problem, then someone must accept ownership of that problem.

The most effective way to deal with the "but game" is to stop the discussion and make the child restate the problem. Shifting the weight of the problem off himself or herself places the blame on someone else, which can easily become a serious hurting problem.

The children and the teacher must keep careful watch for the "get back" game. Playing the "get back" game can do serious damage to the group. Counting problems to make another group member look bad, digging up insignificant problems for other group members, setting up other group members for problems, and tattling are easily recognizable examples of the "get back" game.

By constantly reinforcing the need to "help" one another, the group leader can avoid serious problems with this game. Problem session can easily become a playground for the "get back" artist. It may be necessary for the group leader to stop the children from reminding one another of problems if the problem session becomes burdened with the "get back" game.

Parental Involvement

While parental involvement is encouraged in many schools, and the benefits to emotionally and behaviorally disabled children are numerous, involvement is often difficult to achieve. The increasing number of working parents and single parent families makes time valuable. Regularly scheduled conferences and special education staffings are about as much in-school time as many parents can afford.

Because of the difficulty in getting parents into the school, teachers must devise other ways to promote their involvement. Communicating program goals to parents and enlisting their support in using this program will go far in encouraging the child.

Through weekly or monthly newsletters, parent/teacher conferences, small group meetings or home visits by the teacher, materials and information about the peer group program and its goals can be given to the parents. The language of the problem list will gradually creep into the child's vocabulary and inevitably enter family discussion.

Communication with other teachers in the school will also help develop a strong program. An informational meeting to brief the school staff will facilitate their understanding of the peer group program and aid in their communication with the children. Many of the children will eventually be participating in regular school activities, making communication with teachers essential. A brief activity report provided by the special education teacher enables the classroom teacher to communicate efficiently about the child's participation in his or her classroom. This report can then be used as direct feedback during the group meeting.

The Joyful Community

In addition to developing group meetings and encouraging strength and support among the children, the teacher must be concerned with the entire classroom atmosphere. It is not enough to have a well-developed peer group, or stimulating academic involvement. These elements must work together in establishing a controlled, yet productive environment.

A pervasive feeling of joy must surround the children throughout their school experiences. The classroom, the teacher, and more important, the rest of the school must let these children know they are welcome. The child's school world must say, "Hey, you're great. It's good to have you with us." While many schools send these important messages to their students, care must be taken with special children to be sure they receive the message. They must be embraced with the spirit of a truly caring community.

These special children, like all children, share a need to learn. Their play is their work, and they build bridges to more sophisticated learning. However, their ability to construct these bridges is often in need of additional reinforcement from those around them.

Teacher training programs for individuals preparing to work with behaviorally or emotionally disabled children often encourage teachers to look seriously at the classroom environment. An issue addressed in this analysis is the distractibility of such children and the need for the environment to accommodate this. The materials used for display on bulletin boards and throughout the classroom must be chosen carefully. Unfortunately, this is often misinterpreted as a need for no displays. The emotional disabilities classroom is often stripped of display items and is without bulletin boards. The student desks are placed far apart, and the teacher's desk faces the class. An emotional disabilities classroom may need a quiet area, free from distraction, for work or instruction. It may need a study carrel or two for the child needing reduced visual stimulation. But, children will not feel good about their work without display for recognition. Those needing socialization skills will not develop them if they are not allowed to work with others.

The classroom must reflect what is happening there. Display items, motivational materials and classroom arrangement must reflect trust and the expectation the teacher has for the children. Children with problems developing relationships with classmates must have the opportunity to sit by and work with their classmates. They must be encouraged and supported throughout this process and be provided every opportunity to learn from these experiences.

Isolation in a school can be as deadly as isolation in the classroom. Placing special education classrooms in unused buildings away from other children, placing these classrooms in portable units somewhere out of sight on the school grounds, and using the two vacant classrooms at the end of the hall are all frequent remedies to the problem of "Now that we have them, what do we do with them?" Classrooms must be located where there is every opportunity for practice. These children must be aware of their surroundings and be visible to those who surround them. The school is their practice field. The children can be afforded safety in their classroom and provided the opportunity for experimentation in the mainstream of the school setting. Experimentation in "normalcy" works best when children are surrounded by peers who care and are ready to help and offer their encouragement.

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